

Letter from the Southwest

A declaration of interdependence

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When, in the interest of wellness, it becomes necessary for healers from multiple traditions to renounce the narcissism eroding their collective health care, and to re-assume, in the midst of growing interpersonal greed, the selfless and service-oriented station to which nature and its Creator call them, a deep empathy for sick people compels them to declare their shared vision of healing.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are born to an interdependent whole; that illness embodies isolation from the whole; that ill people are entitled to kindness, compassion, and blameless charity in their pursuit to re-experience the whole. That to help ill people return to the whole, hospitals and health care systems are instituted among communities, deriving their sacred authority from the confidence of the sick; that whenever any hospital or health care system recklessly segregates the sick, it is the obligation of healers to change or abandon it, and to organize new centers and systems of healing that remain faithful to the basic precepts of compassionate caring and interdependence. Convention and financial comfort, no doubt, will prevent the radical revision of ailing medical systems without just cause. Nonetheless, when a record of spiritless policies clearly evidences apathy instead of empathy in the health care system, it is healers' moral duty to disavow such callous indifference, and refocus professional attention on the heart and soul of caring. Such has been the sad witness of contemporary physicians and healers from many traditions; and such are now the circumstances that press them to reassert the primary place of charity and kindness in the healing professions.

The recent history of the current health care system is one of repeated assaults against the commitment to compassion. To demon-

strate this, let harsh realities be reviewed by a disillusioned world:

- The health care system places money before people. Witness the emphasis on consumerism rather than caring, the refusal of some facilities to treat the indigent and the uninsured, the motivation of corporations to profit from illness and despair.
- The health care system studies instead of believes. Notice how physicians invoke science to prove the worthiness of compassion, how researchers search for statistics that social support improves outcomes, how concerns over resource allocation have silenced the spirit of charity in contemporary healing.
- The health care system seeks control over diverse traditions, not integration with them. Acknowledge that much interest to integrate "alternative" healing practices followed surveys showing widespread use of such practices, that some new clinics juxtapose healing traditions without considering whether different traditions should be integrated, that academicians subject alternative traditions to standard statistical analysis when assessing outcomes and efficacy.
- The health care system embraces an ethic of selfish separation, not one of community and interdependence. See the distrust doctors harbor of "non-compliant" patients, the personal frustration physicians express when illnesses do not respond to prescribed treatments, the uncompromising drive of conventional medicine to label individuals diseased without due attention to other, more social senses of being.

Although aware of these transgressions, we have, thus far, only feebly petitioned for

change. Disaffection with the current system causes many healers to leave their professions rather than publicly advocate for improvement. This inability to stridently defend what we should hold most dear questions our commitment to sick people and healing.

Nor have we shown great vision in shaping a model of integrated care for ill people. We should have decried the incursion of business into alternative health care, asking our leaders, and ourselves, why sick people seek alternative health care instead of how much they are willing to spend on it. Our innate sense of compassion, not our learned savvy for consumer trends, must guide us in efforts to integrate our diverse histories. We have, for too long, grown deaf to the voice of suffering rising from the depths of illness. We must, if we are to aspire to good and honorable healing, relearn the art of listening, and reaffirm our fundamental commitment to caring.

We, therefore, representatives of the moral outrage of the healing professions, recognizing the urgent need to defend our histories of compassion and selflessness in healing, do solemnly publish and declare that sick people, healers, and healing traditions are interdependent; that kindness and charity are not hypotheses to be proven but values to be cherished; that healing rituals rooted in culture are not techniques to be integrated but heritages to be respected; that all people, no matter their financial fortunes, are entitled to compassion when they become sick; and, that all healers, no matter their traditions, are responsible for helping the sick in their journey to re-experience the whole. And, for the support of this declaration, with a resolute reverence for the presence of divine mystery in our lives, we pledge to those who are sick, and to each other, our hearts, our histories, and our sincere humility.